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ABSTRACT

A self-grading form that was developed for a large introductory religion course was designed to clarify the objectives of the discussion session, provide a uniform grading process, allow the student a chance to assess his own performance, and stimulate the student to consult with the assistant instructor (AI) for improvement in discussion. A syllabus coordinates lectures with a weekly discussion focus. The AIs are trained not to lecture or provide discussion questions. Students are asked to hand in a discussion question each week, and students have a right to evaluate themselves using a standardized evaluation form. The form is designed to serve as a means of communication between the student and the AI and a way to assign a grade to the student for participation in the discussion. Student evaluation is concerned with the following factors: attendance, submission of questions, kinds of questions, clarity of expression, preparation, courtesy, tolerance, ability to relate materials, and listening. The form, which is appended, can be easily modified to fit other disciplines. (SW)

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ENHANCING AND EVALUATING THE DISCUSSION SECTION

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One of the complaints made by students in large lecture courses with discussion sections is that they do not understand the function of discussion, how it relates to the lectures, and (most immediate to their concerns) how they will be given a "discussion grade." When there are several graduate assistants, each with a different style and concept of the discussion section, the problem is compounded: one AI may require attendance, another may not; one may give frequent quizzes and another, never; one may introduce new ideas while another rehearses lecture material. The AIs themselves, new to the grading process and liable to all the traps and mistakes of that adventure, often cannot say how or why they graded a given student in a particular way. When the faculty member meets with the AIs to discuss problems, s/he finds as many opinions about "our common purpose" as s/he has graduate assistants.

In an effort to address these problems for a large introductory religion course, I have designed a tool that specifies a uniform grading process, gives the student a chance to assess his/her own performance, operates as an invitation to the student to work with the AI for improvement in discussion, and makes clear just what the discussion is about and how it relates to the course.

The self-grading form was designed to conform to my pedagogical presuppositions, which are:

1) the burden of the lecture rests upon the instructor; the AIs need not (indeed, should not) feel obliged to repeat lecture material, or to explain it. The AIs, therefore, do not function to make the lecture clear.

2) the impersonal situation of the lecture (200+ students in a large auditorium) makes the discussion section the only (and perfect)

place for interaction among students and between a student and the material. The AIs, therefore, should be people whose energies can be fully channeled into leading a good discussion and teaching the students how to ask and talk about questions.

3) just as I have major responsibility for lecture clarity, and the AIs have major responsibility for producing and maintaining an atmosphere for creative discussion, the students have the primary role in setting the discussion agenda. The discussion section is not a chance for the students to talk about what I think is interesting, or what the AIs may have come up with; it is, rather, that time when students can (and ought to) discuss their own questions.

In order to direct the course in such a way that it fits within the limits of my presuppositions, I have had to design a very precise syllabus which coordinates lectures with a weekly discussion focus. For each lecture session the syllabus specifies the lecture topic (questions to be raised, points to be covered, purpose), a reading assignment, and an expectation (what the students ought to know after the lecture, what is likely to appear on an exam and what directions some of their further thinking might take.) The precision of the syllabus is meant to guide the student through an enormous amount of material (a synthetic introduction to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), give the students some security about what we are doing, and invite them to wonder about and question the material.

Since I free my AIs from the burden of having to set their own policies and prohibit them from lecturing, I can be more demanding about their expertise as discussion leaders. They have all participated in the training program provided through the Division of Development and Special Projects. That program utilizes TABS (Teaching Analysis By Students), a questionnaire devel-

oped at the University of Massachusetts and designed to provide data about teaching activity. The students assess the strong and weak points of the AI, and the AI, using the same instrument, assesses his/her own; a comparison is made and strategies employed where necessary to help the AI do better in specific areas. In addition to the TABS analysis, the AIs are observed and may be videotaped. The whole process is meant to help them establish discussion goals suited to their personalities and strengths. Finally, they participate in a training session about inquiry-focused discussion which helps them direct the discussion in a way that minimizes "shooting the breeze." All this AI training is done through the Division of Development and Special Projects, which provides the services in a confidential manner. The AIs therefore, do not have to fear exposing weaknesses and problems to me, though they are surely free to do so if they wish.

In order to dramatize the common policies and purposes of the discussion sections, I give a fifteen-minute talk in each section during the first week. I want to make it clear to the students that the policies for the section are followed in every section, that we have some specific expectations of ourselves and of them. There are several important points I make at this first session:

a) that discussion agenda is the students' privilege and responsibility,

b) that the AI will not lecture to them under any circumstances; if the lecture is unclear, they should report it and I will clarify it in lecture,

c) that the AI will not provide discussion questions; all questions must come from them,

d) that we know asking questions is an art and requires practice and

that we are there specifically to help them learn how to do it,

e) that, in order to help them learn to ask good questions, we are asking them to hand in a discussion question each week which will be evaluated, commented upon, and used as part of the discussion agenda that week,

f) finally, that they have a right to evaluate themselves in the section and that we use a standardized form for that evaluation.

The self-evaluation form clarifies the purpose and strategy of the discussion section. It has been designed to serve a double purpose: to be a means of communication between the student and the AI and to be the means of assigning a grade to the student for his/her participation in the discussion. As a communication medium, it is exchanged once during the semester, immediately after the mid-term. The grades to the students by the AIs and by the students themselves do not count toward the final grade; the exchange of forms at this point is simply an opportunity for the student and the AI to see how their evaluations agree or disagree. When there is a serious disagreement, the AI will contact the student for a conference, discuss the discrepancy, and offer to help. When the forms are exchanged during the final discussion section, the grades given by the students to themselves and the grades given by the AIs count toward the final grade. The maximum possible points on the form is 150. The student can give himself/herself up to 50 points; the AI, using the same form, gives the student up to 50 points and multiplies it by 2. The total points produce the discussion grade, an evaluation that proceeds from a grading partnership between the AI and the student; in the general scheme of the course 150 points is approximately 1/3 of the final point goal of 500 points. One could argue that this method destroys spontaneity. Perhaps. On the other hand, it provides an

equal grading opportunity over a large student population, discourages popularity contests, encourages communication and individual improvement, provides clarity about the grading process and gives the student a chance to participate in it.

Finally, the form describes the values that a discussion section ought to have to be an integral part of the course. These values grew out of student suggestions, critiques from graduate students, consultation with colleagues and the Division of Development and Special Projects. The main lines of explanation can be given simply.

1) Attendance - since students have responsibility for participating in the discussion, raising questions and learning how to talk about them, their attendance is required.
2) Submission of questions - the student has an obligation to prepare for the discussion section by reviewing the material and formulating questions about it that help to focus a discussion.
3) Kinds of questions - the question-asking process is not something to be done flippantly, with simple informational questions that can be answered by looking at the textbook; it is supposed to be a serious delving into issues.
4) Clarity of expression - we want to help the students articulate their opinions and teach them that having an opinion is useless unless they can formulate it for others.
5) Preparation - building on #3, we ask the students to prepare for the discussion section, to come ready to discuss rather than just wandering in.
6) Courtesy - some students think talking all the time is the best approach to discussion, others think they do not have to talk at

all; we try to suggest that both positions are extremes.

7) Tolerance - the academic study of religion requires careful attendance to the difference between advocacy and investigation; we are trying to underline the distinction between their roles as student and believer/non-believer of a given tradition.

8) Preparation - another emphasis on preparation for discussion meant to weight the grading form a little on that basis.

9) Ability to relate material - we try to teach the students to do more than recall information; since the course is synthetic in approach, we try to encourage an ability to synthesize material.

10) Listening - discussion is more than talking, it is listening and being willing to follow up on something another student says; this prevents students from making a comment and drifting off for the rest of the session.

The form can be easily modified to fit other disciplines. It is simple and straightforward, and student response to it has been good. The students appreciate being able to evaluate and grade themselves in a way that really counts, and they like the idea that each discussion section runs the same way in terms of demands and opportunities. The AIs appreciate having a standardized form by which to evaluate students that frees them from having to decide what policies to use and when or where to suspend them. Finally, it puts a real value on discussion. In many courses the final grade is based upon examination performance only, which makes discussion fit the model of exam preparation and lecture clarification. By utilizing this method, one can make discussion an integral and valuable part of the learning process.

R152 Introduction to Religion in the West
Discussion Section Rating Form

Name _____ Points _____

Instructions: Your AI will determine 2/3 of your discussion section grade and you will determine 1/3. Twice during the semester both you and your A.I. will complete this form and exchange it. The first time, at the mid-term, will be for your information and improvement; the second time, during the last discussion section of the semester, will count towards your final grade.
It is hoped that use of this form will focus attention on specific strengths and weaknesses so that you will be able to improve your performance in this course. On each scale rate your own performance as objectively as possible by placing an "X" on the scale where you think you belong. Add up the total points and write it in the space provided. Your A.I. will do the same thing, but will double his/her evaluation. Potentially, you can get 150 points for discussion.

ATTENDANCE

1	2	3	4	5
I seldom came to the discussion section.		I came to discussion about half the time.		I always came to discussion.

SUBMISSION OF QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AGENDA

1	2	3	4	5
I rarely submitted questions for discussion.		I submitted questions about half the time.		I submitted questions for each session.

KIND OF QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR DISCUSSION AGENDA

1	2	3	4	5
My questions asked for information only, things I could have looked up in the books/readings.		My questions showed an ability to apply the issues and principles to new examples.		My questions frequently tried to draw general conclusions from the evidence of readings and lectures.

CLARITY OF EXPRESSION

1	2	3	4	5
I have opinions but am unable to make them clear enough for others to respond to them.		I can sometimes clarify my positions for others.		Most of the time I am able to let others know my position clearly.

PREPARATION FOR DISCUSSION AND RECALL

1	2	3	4	5
I do not prepare carefully and can rarely recall much of anything from readings/lectures.		I prepare to discuss the readings and lectures and can recall information accurately.		I prepare to discuss the questions and can relate information from readings/ lectures to new situations.

COURTESY

1	2	3	4	5
I talked so much that I dominated the conversation and never listened; or I was silent all the time.		I learned that good discussion is give and take--talk and listen.		I listened well and talked enough to keep the discussion going.

TOLERANCE OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

1	2	3	4	5
I was seldom able to understand how people can seriously believe most of the things we study.		I was able to listen to other views and consider them thoughtfully about half the time.		I was usually able to listen to other views and consider them thoughtfully.

PREPARATION FOR DISCUSSION AND QUALITY OF DISCUSSION

1	2	3	4	5
I did not prepare for discussion and my questions in class asked for points of information only.		I prepared for discussion by doing reading and reviewing lecture material and could discuss issues in an informed manner.		I prepared for discussion well and my questions related the main concepts in the course to new situations.

ABILITY TO RELATE AND SYNTHESIZE MATERIAL

1	2	3	4	5
During discussion I rarely relate the readings to lectures or to the general ideas of the course.		I can often relate the readings to lectures and to the general ideas of the course.		I can usually relate the readings, lectures and general ideas to different situations.

ABILITY TO LISTEN AND TO BUILD A DISCUSSION

1	2	3	4	5
I never listened to other people and did not know what they had said when called upon to comment.		I listened to other people most of the time and could build upon their comments to further the discussion.		I listened well to others and was able to relate their ideas to the topic and comment on them to enhance discussion.